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ABSTRACT

Practical suggestions for improving the mealtime environment in child care centers are provided for child development personnel. Nine factors to ensure a successful mealtime environment are given along with suggestions for introducing new foods and for encouraging independence and socialization during mealtime. A section dealing with special circumstances such as slow eaters, obese children, allergies, and special diets is followed by ways to encourage children to participate in many aspects of the meal including planning the menu, growing the food, preparing the food, decorating and setting the table, and cleaning up. It is recommended that a statement of nutrition philosophy for a child care center be formulated. (A sample philosophy statement is included.) (JH)

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Making Mealtime a Happy Time for Preschoolers

A Guide for Teachers

1982 Edition

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Making Mealtime a Happy Time for Preschoolers

A Guide for Teachers

California Nutrition Education
and Training Program

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Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to provide child development personnel with practical suggestions to improve the mealtime environment in child care centers.

Children should have happy experiences at mealtime. During early childhood, children are developing attitudes about food, learning to accept a wide variety of foods, and learning to appreciate the pleasurable experiences that food gives.

Mealtime is an important aspect of nutrition education. Through positive lunchroom experiences and classroom instruction, children can learn to appreciate nutritious food. For mealtime to be a pleasurable experience for the children in a child care center, a cooperative effort among the director, teachers, food service personnel, and parents is needed. This team must work together to plan and serve nutritious meals, to develop children's positive attitudes toward nutritious foods, and to encourage children's healthful eating habits.

Premealtime

A pleasant mealtime climate helps shape positive food habits and attitudes in children. Serving meals in a relaxed and happy atmosphere facilitates children's acceptance and enjoyment of the food. It is important for children to enjoy eating a wide variety of foods because their nutritional well-being depends on this practice.

Many factors work together to make mealtime successful. Check the following list to be sure the mealtime environment is set for success:

Is an adult seated at the table during all mealtimes?

■ An adult should be seated with the children during all mealtimes because role modeling is essential to the development of their healthful eating habits and positive attitudes toward nutrition. The role model exemplifies the eating behaviors children should imitate. The adult should eat the same meal the children are eating and should refrain from making any negative comments or critical facial expressions while eating. Sweets, sodas, or

other less nutritious foods should not be eaten in front of the children. An adult's attitude of calm concern, interest, and encouragement sets a relaxed pace for the entire meal.

Is the table set for family-style service?

■ Meals can be served in different ways: family style, buffet style, or preplated. Family-style service presents many learning opportunities for preschool children. Their coordination is improved by having them use utensils and pass and serve various kinds of food. Participating in mealtime activities and conversation stimulates the development of children's language and social skills.

Are tables and chairs at the correct height for children?

■ Appropriately sized furniture is essential for children's comfort. Their feet should be firmly placed on the floor and should not dangle in the air. Sitting at a proper height at the table allows children to reach their utensils easily, thus reducing spills.

Are the tables overcrowded?	■ Only six to eight children should be seated at each table. Overcrowded tables invite behavioral problems for the teacher.
Are the eating utensils easy for children to handle?	■ Disposable utensils are difficult for children to handle. Glasses, plates, and silverware that are unbreakable and child-size should be provided. Handles of silverware should be short and broad for little hands to grasp easily. Tines of forks should be short and blunt. Glasses with a broad base are easy for children to handle.
Is the eating area attractive and clean?	■ Children eat better in comfortable, cheerful surroundings. Distractions, such as traffic through the eating area or loud noises or voices from adjoining rooms, should be minimized. The eating area should be clean, and washing hands should be a regular activity before each meal or snack.
Are mealtimes well spaced?	■ If meals are served too closely together, children may not eat because they do not feel hungry. On the other hand, too much time between meals and snacks can make children feel irritable.
Is a quiet time planned just before meals?	■ A short quiet time before meals can help children settle down and relax. The teacher may tell a story, play soft music, or talk about the meal.
Is the menu posted?	■ The menu should be posted to inform staff, parents, and the children of the foods to be served.

Mealtime

Mealtime can be used to introduce new foods and to provide an opportunity for encouraging the independence and socialization of children.

Introduction of New Foods

Introducing new foods to young children requires patience and ingenuity on the part of teachers and food service personnel. The following are suggested ways to introduce new foods:

- Introduce **one** new food at a time.
- Serve a small portion of the new food. Ask the child to take only a tiny taste the first time. Start with a serving of one or two teaspoons. For small bits of food, such as carrot coins or peas, you might suggest, "Take the same number of peas as the number of candles you blew out on your last birthday cake."
- Serve the new food so that it is easily identifiable. However, sometimes serving a new food with a familiar one can improve a child's acceptance of the new food. Cauliflower served with cheese sauce is an example.

- Emphasize similarities between the new food and other familiar foods. Say to the children, "Does it taste like a food you already enjoy eating?"

- Serve finger foods whenever possible. Cut the food into bite-size pieces that are easy for young children to pick up and eat.
- Serve foods that are appropriate to the age group. Tacos, for example, may be difficult for some young children to hold and eat. A tortilla may be more acceptable.
- Understand that textures, colors, and temperatures are important in the presentation of food. When zucchini is overcooked, for example, it loses much of its appeal.
- Do not be discouraged if a new food is offered and children reject it. Wait a few weeks and reintroduce the food. Try to find out what the children do not like about the food. Perhaps changing the way it is prepared can make the difference.
- Talk about food during a quiet time before lunch. Emphasize the new tastes, colors, shapes, and aromas that the children will experience when they taste the new food at lunch. The children may be so excited about "little green treetops" that they look forward to eating broccoli.
- Present new foods casually. Do not force the children to eat.
- Give praise, a hug, or a smile as forms of positive reinforcement when children taste a new food. Try giving rewards, such as buttons made from construction paper that say, "I tasted tofu" or "I like carrots."
- Let the children see you eat and enjoy new foods.

Independence and Socialization

When consistent structure and routines are established for meals, children know what is expected of them. Meeting reasonable behavioral expectations becomes a regular part of the mealtime. The following behaviors encourage children's independence and socialization during mealtime:

- Have young children seat themselves independently; use placemats labeled with the children's names to help them. The placemats create each child's own eating space and teach name recognition. They also help eliminate most seating problems.
- Allow children to serve themselves. This practice helps them develop gross motor coordination and also gives them a chance to practice selecting the right size portion of food. Young children can begin by pouring their own milk.
- Have the children take responsibility for their spills. Provide a sponge at the table so that they easily can clean up their own accidents. Expect children to be messy sometimes. They will acquire skill with practice. Under all circumstances, try to handle spills calmly.
- Eat with the children to share in the social setting of the mealtime. Encourage pleasant conversation and the use of "magic" words, such as please and thank you. Remind children that courtesy makes people nice to be around. Set an example for the children to follow, and they will imitate you.

Special Circumstances

This section presents successful ways to deal with special circumstances during mealtimes.

Likes and Dislikes

Children will have some likes and dislikes, just as adults do. Avoid negative reactions to picky eaters. Finicky or unstable eating habits are characteristic of young children. Sometimes, when children refuse to eat certain foods, this behavior might be a way of their getting attention, or they may have a real dislike for certain foods. Usually, if little attention is given to children's dislikes and their tendency to eat only one kind of food, these habits will be outgrown.

Preference for One Food

It is not unusual for children to have a food that they suddenly want to eat every day, to the exclusion of others. However, this behavior usually does not last for very long, perhaps a week or so. Normally, the child will get tired of eating the same thing at every meal and soon will begin eating a variety of foods.

Bribery

Bribery creates a negative image about the food you would like the child to eat. Have you ever said, "No dessert until you eat your vegetables?" The bribery in this statement implies that the dessert is the better part of the meal. Physically forcing a child to eat or using food for disciplinary purposes does not remove a child's dislike for a food. In fact, harsh treatment may increase a child's aversion to a certain food.

Slow Eaters

Give children plenty of time to eat and enjoy their meals. Allow slow eaters to serve themselves first and begin eating. Seat them next to you, so that you can provide direct positive encouragement, such as a hug.

If children lose interest or dawdle at the table after a reasonable length of time, quietly and firmly remove the food.

Left-Handed Children

Remember to seat left-handed children on the left end of the table, so that they do not bump elbows with their neighbors.

Obesity

If children are diagnosed as being overweight by a nurse or doctor, discuss the situation, as a team, with the parents and children. If children want second servings at lunch, suggest that they take foods that have few calories, such as vegetables or fruits. You might also suggest that they eat more slowly and chew each bite carefully before swallowing. Also, encouraging children to be more active in play may help them to lose weight.

Allergies*

When a child is unable to eat certain foods because of an allergy, the child care center staff may make substitutions if a doctor's statement includes recommended alternative foods. If the child has more than one allergy and the center is not able to accommodate special diets, the parents should be asked to provide substitute foods.

Food Preferences*

Some parents request special diets for their children because of alternative life-styles or for religious, cultural, or ethnic reasons. Whether the children bring their own food or eat parts of the school meal, show respect for their preferences and do not allow the other children to ridicule them. Emphasize the parts of the meal that are the same or similar. You might say to the children, "We are all eating a kind of vegetable, bread, and fruit."

*Staff from child care centers that are participating in the Child Care Food Program may refer to Policy Memo 82-1 for further information regarding meal substitutions.

How Children Can Help

Children should be encouraged to participate in many aspects of the meal. The tasks should be suited to the children's muscle development.

Planning the Menu

Children can help plan the menu. People who prepare food can show children pictures of several fruits and vegetables that are served for lunch and might ask the children, "Which vegetable do you like to eat with chicken?" These people then can plan menus around some of the children's preferences.

Growing the Food

Start a backyard garden at your center. Children are more likely to enjoy eating a vegetable if they watch it grow. Radishes and lettuce grow easily and quickly in most soil conditions.

Mung beans or alfalfa sprouts can be grown without soil in the classroom. Soak the seeds for several hours in an open

jar of water. With a rubberband, secure cheesecloth over the mouth of the jar and drain the water from the seeds. Then lay the jar on its side. Rinse and drain the water every day, morning and afternoon, for four or five days. Enjoy the sprouts on a sandwich or in soup or salad.

Preparing the Food

Children can contribute to the mealtime food preparation as a cooking activity. They may begin by choosing which part of the meal they would like to prepare. For example, they can help prepare a green salad or peel fruits for dessert.

Decorating the Eating Area

Children might share an interesting, clean object from the center or their homes to serve as a centerpiece. Rocks or shells from a collection, houseplants, an unbreakable knick-knack, or a favorite toy or book are all appropriate centerpieces.

The children can make a centerpiece of paper flowers by coloring flower shapes cut out by the teacher. The flowers are then taped to the ends of straws and placed in a paper cup vase.

Colorful, washable placemats make an eating area more attractive and are easy for children to make. Each child draws a picture of his or her favorite food on construction paper. The teacher then laminates the picture or covers it with clear contact paper.

Setting the Table

By placing unbreakable utensils on the table, younger children can help set the table.

Postmealtime

Children should be encouraged to participate in all aspects of the mealtime, including clean-up activities. An area should be set aside where children can scrape and stack their dirty dishes. The table for scraping the dishes should be a height that children can reach easily. Two plastic dishpans work well as receptacles: one for dirty dishes and the other for dirty flatware and glasses. A garbage can should be placed at one end of the table. Stacking plates, flatware, and glasses separately gives children a chance to practice sorting different kinds of objects. Children also can remove placemats or a centerpiece and wipe the table clean.

Washing hands and brushing teeth after eating should be a regular part of postmealtime activities, too.

DEVELOPING A NUTRITION PHILOSOPHY

As your nutrition education program grows, you may find it helpful to develop a nutrition philosophy for your center. Your philosophy should include the principles and goals of your nutrition education program. Developing a nutrition philosophy will require recommendations from the community, staff, parents, and children.

THIRD STREET CHILDREN'S CENTER
NUTRITION PHILOSOPHY

1. We are concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of the children in our care.
2. We are committed to providing nutritious meals in a relaxed and happy eating environment.
3. We are committed to providing accurate nutrition information to help children make wise food choices.

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